



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Washington, DC 20420

Keeping Faith with America's Veterans

Homeless veterans, jobless veterans, incarcerated veterans... veterans without hope, veterans in need.

Faith-based and community organizations have been a cornerstone of community assistance throughout American History. They are eager to provide badly-needed services and many do. However, accessing federal resources is difficult for some organizations because of outdated government rules and regulations that often prohibit these groups from competing for federal grants on a level playing field.

Consider John Downing, Chief Executive Officer of the United Veterans of America, Inc., which was founded in 1994 to help homeless veterans in Leeds and Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Throughout the 1990s, Downing submitted several transitional housing and homeless grant applications to the Department of Housing and Urban Development ("HUD") and Department of Veterans Affairs ("VA"). His applications were not given the serious consideration they deserved because his non-profit organization, classified as faith-based, was ineligible for federal funding. "I felt like we needed an advocate for non-profit, faith-based and community groups *inside* the governmental process. Someone who understands what we need and is willing to fight for us," said Downing.

Policies regarding faith-based and community groups' participation in federal grants-making and contracting processes are changing for United Veterans of America and thousands of other faith-based and community organizations. In 2001, President George W. Bush signed Executive Order 13198 which established Centers for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in five cabinet departments – Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Education, Labor and Justice.

In 2004, the President extended his Faith-Based and Community Initiative to the Department of Veterans Affairs, establishing the VA Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Partnering with faith-based groups was nothing new to VA. The VA Voluntary Service Program (VAVS), which is the largest volunteer program in the federal government, has provided more than fifty-nine years of service to America's veterans. More than 350 national and local veterans, civic, and service organizations contributed close to thirteen million hours of service to VA last year. Since 1994, VA has awarded more than \$230 million to more than 500 faith-based and community organizations through the homeless grant and per diem program, with funding earmarked for everything from transitional housing to meals for homeless veterans.

In the past, some government regulations went as far as prohibiting faith-based organizations from even applying for federal funds. At other times, the barriers have been more subtle, but the message is still the same—"faith-based organizations need not apply."

Darin Selnick, Director of the VA Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, is hoping to change that perception. He is no stranger to faith-based and community organizations. He has previously served as California State Commander and National Executive Committee Member for the Jewish War Veterans. The challenges he faced while serving in those capacities taught him that even subtle barriers can taint relationships.

“I know what it’s like to be excluded because of your faith,” said Selnick. “Legitimate faith-based and community organizations interested in serving at-risk veterans shouldn’t be left out in the cold. They deserve the same access to federal resources as other community groups. And they will get it at VA.”

The laws governing federal grants to faith-based groups are clear, according to Selnick. “Direct federal funds cannot be used for inherently religious activities and veterans must receive services regardless of their religious affiliation or beliefs. My goal is to make it easier for VA and these organizations to work together, and to look for new ways these partnerships can serve veterans in every community,” he said.

There are many partnership opportunities within the VA for faith-based and community organizations. By striving to create innovative pilot and demonstration programs, VA is increasing these opportunities and expanding the availability of community services that meet veterans’ needs.

If your organization has a potential partnering opportunity or wants more information about VA programs and the VA Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiative, visit our website at <http://www1.va.gov/opa/fbci/>.